

Food Safety Alert – 10/13/06

The headlines today concern the O157:H7 strain of E Coli found in 3 samples of cow manure on a cattle ranch which is located within one mile from spinach fields. Officials have not released the location of the ranch – but stated that it was one of 4 cattle ranches being investigated this week in either San Benito or Monterey Counties. The owner of the cattle operation also leases out a portion of the ranch to a produce farmer. The San Jose Mercury is reporting that the samples were taken from a cattle pasture which is located directly across a road from a spinach field – but the samples themselves were gathered from a point within the pasture which was at least ½ mile from the spinach fields. Kevin Reilly of the State Department of Health Services indicated that the farmer had only implemented “some but not all” of the good agricultural practices which had been developed in response to previous outbreaks.

<http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/living/health/15748561.htm>

Andrew Cumming of Metz Fresh told the *Salinas Californian* that the location of produce fields and cattle pastures on the same ranch indicates that the location of the ranch and farm were probably in San Benito County, since such configurations are not common to Monterey County.

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061013/NEWS01/610130332>

Although the press is reporting that this is the first time an outbreak of E. coli has been linked to a specific source (see, e.g., <http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/living/health/15748561.htm>), health officials have not concluded that this was the cause of the outbreak. Investigators have also found evidence of wild pigs on several of the farms under investigation.

<http://www.montereyherald.com/mld/montereyherald/15748458.htm>.

Although not conclusory, the findings narrow the list of possible causes. In addition, health officials stated that this development does not totally absolve growers. Joe Pezzini told the Herald that the industry standards followed by Salinas Valley farmers do not address the issue of the location of produce fields in relation to cattle ranches.

Trevor Suslow of the UC Extension, said the state itself has no regulations covering the safe distance between cattle ranches and produce fields. However, Jerry Gillespie, director of the Western Institute for Food Safety and Security, also affiliated with University of California-Davis, disagreed with the threat livestock pastures pose to produce fields, stating that good agricultural practices require barriers which would eliminate cross-contamination.

Natural Selection Foods spokeswoman Samantha Cabaluna told reporters that the finding vindicates NSF, which has maintained that the source was in the fields, and not in their facility. Cabaluna told the Californian that NSF typically inspects their fields for adherence to the good agricultural practices once a week during the harvest, but could not elaborate on how often or when they inspected the fields near the cattle ranch in question because it has not been identified to them.

<http://www.californianonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061013/NEWS01/610130332>

Although her death has not officially been linked to the E. Coli outbreak due to complications with the genetic testing on the bacteria she was infected with, the family of an elderly Hagerstown woman who died last month after eating bagged spinach has filed a federal wrongful-death lawsuit against Natural Selection Foods LLC and Dole Food Co.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/12/AR2006101201693.html>